

Accord Coalition briefing on Baroness Flather's Education Bill amendment to retain Ofsted's duty to inspect how schools contribute to community cohesion



Overview

In the Government's eagerness to reduce bureaucracy and give schools greater freedom and autonomy, the Education Bill currently proposes to take away Ofsted's current duty to inspect how schools promote community cohesion.

This is a very important safeguard, which if taken away would risk empowering those who would mitigate against social cohesion in our schools. We believe removing this duty would be especially unwise given that state funded schools are currently being given far more freedom and autonomy, many are being inspected less frequently, new and untested education providers are coming into the state sector through the Free Schools programme, while society is also becoming more and more diverse.

We therefore urge the Committee to amend the Bill to retain the above protections.

Amendment

Clause 40 – Requiring Ofsted to inspect schools' contribution to community cohesion, by Baroness Flather

Baroness Flather

Page 36, line 43, at end insert—

“() the contribution made by the school to community cohesion.”

The 2006 Education and Inspections Act introduced a duty upon all maintained schools in England to promote community cohesion, and on Ofsted to report on the contributions made in this area when undertaking a Section 5 school inspection. Clause 40 of the Education Bill proposes to remove Ofsted's duty to inspect community cohesion in schools entirely, while Baroness Flather's amendment simply reinserts it.

Evidence in recent years has repeatedly given cause for concern about the way that many schools, and very often schools with a religious character, operate in narrow and exclusive ways, such as in their pupil admissions and the assemblies, Religious Education and Citizenship they provide, and the negative consequences that this has for wider society.

It is known that schools that are inclusive of others help to create communities more trusting and at ease with themselves. 'The Cantle Report'¹ was commissioned by the Home Office and published in 2001 after race riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley that year. The report noted how riots had not arisen in diverse areas, such as Southall and Leicester, where pupils learnt about different religions and cultures in local schools.

There is also still a real problem of schools advocating narrow or obscurant agendas. The report 'Faith Schools We Can Believe In'² from the centre-right think tank Policy Exchange released last November maintained that schools were increasingly vulnerable to extremist influences that promoted a divisive and exclusivist ideology.

¹ Cantle, T (2001) *Community Cohesion: A Report by the Independent Review Team*, last accessed 29/09/11, <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2001/12/11/communitycohesionreport.pdf>.

² Bald J, Harber A, Robinson N and Schiff E (2010) *Faith Schools We Can Believe In: Ensuring that tolerant and democratic values are upheld in every part of Britain's education system*, Policy Exchange, last accessed 29/09/11, http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/assets/PX_Faith_Schools.pdf.

However, this is not a peripheral issue only relevant to a small minority of schools. In our increasingly diverse society all schools should help ensure that they are trying to promote better community cohesion. Ofsted's duty to inspect community cohesion was introduced to address widespread public concern about how schools, and particularly faith schools, serve to undermine social cohesion. If parliament removes Ofsted's duty altogether then they would be backtracking on a vital obligation, taking away the principal means of ensuring that schools do try to promote better cohesion and risk making schools' own cohesion duty almost meaningless.

Baroness Flather's amendment was previously discussed at the Bill's Committee Stage. As the Bill was sent to a Grand Committee Peers could not vote on it. However, **during the Committee Stage the amendment got wide support from across the House, from both Government and Opposition benches, and including from the Lord Bishop of Ripon and Leeds, The Rt Revd John Packer**, who like other Peers, urged that the amendment be brought back at the Bill's Report Stage.

Ministers have argued that aspects of Ofsted's community cohesion duty will be served through Ofsted's continuing requirement to report on schools' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. This argument completely ignores the seriousness of how schools can serve to hinder community cohesion or their potential to play a vital and inspiring role in improving mutual understanding.

The promotion of better community cohesion in schools is widely supported among the teaching profession. Of the big three teaching unions in this country, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers do not want the changes proposed by the Bill to Ofsted school inspections to lead to the importance of community cohesion in education to be downgraded (which Accord believes would be inevitable), while the NASUWT noted in their submission³ to the House of Commons Education Bill Committee that the 'removal of the duty to inspect community cohesion will mean that this important duty will be ignored'. Accord firmly agrees with this analysis.

Meanwhile, the National Union of Teachers openly supports Baroness Flather's amendment. **We believe a leading teachers group urging that an inspection measure should be *retained* should send an important signal.**

We therefore urge you to support Baroness Flather's amendment.

If you have any queries please contact the Accord Coalition:

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About the Accord Coalition

The Accord Coalition is a campaign coalition, launched in 2008, which brings together a wide range of organisations, both religious and non-religious, who want state funded schools to be open and suitable to all children of every background, no matter what their parents' or their own beliefs, and who are concerned that restrictive legislation around admissions, employment and the curriculum in state funded faith schools can serve to undermine community cohesion and not adequately prepare children for life in our increasingly diverse society.

Accord's growing list of members and supporters includes the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the British Humanist Association, the Christian think tank Ekklesia, the British Muslims for Secular Democracy, The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and the race equality think tank The Runnymede Trust.

³ Available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmpublic/education/memo/e23.htm>. Last accessed 29/09/11.